



Coppola, Cimino: The Operatics of History

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Coppola, Cimino: The Operatics of History

In retrospect, it seems as if a new kind of cinematic melodrama, exemplified by Francis Ford Coppola's Godfather films and *Apocalypse Now* and by Michael Cimino's *The Deerhunter* and *Heaven's Gate*, developed in the 1970s. Variouslly described as "historical," "operatic," "choral" or "epic," this melodrama marked a new sensibility in American film, at once deeply theatrical and pessimistic, a sensibility which reflected on the one hand the formal influence of European and especially Italian models and on the other the traumatized social/political climate of post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America. Above all, this sensibility was dominated by a sense of history and a taste for spectacle which were interwoven with each other and with the narrative in unprecedented ways.

Many of the striking features of these films call to mind the defining characteristics of stage melodrama at its inception around the time of the French Revolution: heightened theatricality, characters greater than life, powerful emotions and extreme actions, startling scenic effects and elaborate *mise-en-scène*, as well as a penchant for great contrasts on both the moral level (a Manichean sense of good and evil) as well as the scenic one (contrasts in lights, costumes, and so on). Lastly, they attribute a pivotal role to music (the Godfather theme, the violin accompaniment in *Heaven's Gate*) which was originally the defining element of melodrama. The vast social and political fresco against which these films are played out (Vietnam in the case of *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deerhunter*, the immigrant experience in the Godfather films, the "Rustler's War" or the Johnson County Wars in *Heaven's Gate*) suggest, in particular, historical melodrama, which was one of the forms taken by melodrama at an early date. Born at a troubled historical moment—when the old world order, embodied in the French monarchy, was approaching its convulsive

death throes, to be followed by decades of turmoil in the Terror and the rise and fall of Napoleon—early melodrama often turned to real events and characters. In the words of one critic, the French Revolution provided excellent models for monstrous villains for "Nothing was improbable to people who had lived through Thermidor."¹

If these films recall such melodrama, even more so do they evoke one of the paths taken by melodrama in the course of the nineteenth century: opera and, in particular, Verdi. Once again, the vastness of the frescos they present is such that they suggest less the fairly domestic Verdi of *La Traviata* than the Verdi of the great historical/political operas such as *Rigoletto*, *I Lombardi*, or *Don Carlos*. In such works, history sets the scene for the portrayal of Romantic passions and conventions: heroes are torn by conflicting loyalties, crushed by Destiny, tangled in tragic conflicts which can end only in murder or self-destruction. In many instances, these tremendously popular operas were enmeshed in the deeply rooted passions surrounding Italian unification: for these reasons, Antonio Gramsci, the great Italian Marxist theoretician, saw them as the Italian equivalent of the "national-popular" literature created in nineteenth-century France by greatly popular authors such as Sue, Dumas, Balzac. In a penetrating article on melodrama, the contemporary critic Thomas Elsaesser describes this phenomenon thus: "In France it is the works of Sue, Hugo and Balzac that reflect most closely the relation of melodrama to social upheaval while the national liberals in Italy during the Risorgimento . . . apparently saw their political aspirations reflected in Verdi's operas."²

In general, cinema, with its links to popular culture and its mass audience, its ability to create spectacles, has been seen as the twentieth-century counterpart of both melodrama and opera. It is hardly coincidental that



The original melodrama formula: spectacle + music (APOCALYPSE NOW).

“classical” melodrama died at the same time that cinema was born. As for its link with opera, in an article entitled “Pageants of Violence,” Mark Le Fanu observes that: “The emotional charge of opera . . . translated into the ‘expressive’ *mise-en-scène* of early silent cinema as lighting, gesture, musical accompaniment, could stand as the very definition of melo-drama . . . the portrayal of historical events in the cinema inherits opera’s emotional intensity in the emphasis it has always placed on violence, gesture and spectacle.”³ Certainly, such a view is confirmed by films considered historical epics: the spectacular elements in films as diverse as Cecil B. De Mille’s Biblical frescos, *Reds*, or even *Star Wars*, convey, in Le Fanu’s words, the “emotional charge of opera.” But what distinguishes these films from, say, both the operas of Verdi and the recent films by Coppola and Cimino is the fact that they do not touch upon issues of national destiny, issues with the potential of stirring deep collective sentiments. *Reds*, for example, may intrigue

us intellectually, stir us visually, but it does not touch the raw nerve in the national psyche that was so moved by *The Deerhunter* or the Godfather films. Given this important distinction, it is highly suggestive that, like Verdi’s great historical operas, these recent films were made at a deeply troubled historical era, an era which had witnessed not only Watergate and Vietnam, but the end of a certain concept of America. And, I suggest, largely because of their connection to a traumatic and political era, some of them were able to strike a profoundly responsive chord in audiences. (The failure of *Heaven’s Gate* may be partially attributed to the fact that by the time it appeared, the national mood was already changing.) And, as in opera, this chord went so deep, and involved the viewer at such a visceral level, largely through the manipulation of spectacle.

Both the weight given spectacle, and the fact that they evoke crucial moments in the national destiny, bring these films closer to Italian directors such as Visconti, or the Ber-

tolucci of 1900, than to American films of recent years. Not surprisingly, these Italian directors have always been seen as quintessentially operatic. To quote Le Fanu once again: "The operatic view of history has a long tradition . . . most vividly exemplified perhaps by movies like Visconti's *Senso* or Rossellini's two dramatisations of 19th century history *Viva L'Italia* and *Vanina Vanini*. In all these films history is mediated through violent and melodramatic passion. . . ." Despite these similarities, Visconti's view of history is essentially different from that found in these American films. History may be "mediated through passion" but, at the same time, his best films such as *Il Gattopardo* or *Senso*, both of which deal with crucial moments in the creation of modern Italy, are deeply analytic in their approach to history, inspired by a Marxian view of social classes and economic structures. Even the extreme estheticism which is evident in his use of *mise-en-scène* and costumes is linked to underlying themes: significant details reveal the spirit of an epoch or of a certain class. And his tone is consistently theatrical, so much so in fact that the stage of history and the stage of spectacle (be it opera or film) emerge as interwoven domains. Like many of Visconti's characters, the Prince of Salina in *Il Gattopardo* is aware of himself as an actor upon a stage which is both that of history and film. His is a distance born of world-weariness as much as philosophy; his theatrical acting corresponds to a world which views reality itself as a phenomenon subject to multiple illusions.

This combination of historical accuracy and analysis, together with a Baroque/illusionist world view which presents history as theater, is not found in these recent American films. As is usually the case in American cinema, their power lies less in analysis than in recreating the feel and climate of certain experiences (such as the horror of war which comes through in *The Deerhunter*), in presenting believable and even ordinary people (Cimino's, in particular, act with great naturalism) who find themselves in extraordinary situations. (*Apocalypse Now* is the exception here since it operates almost exclusively on a mythic level.) In these films, history is often transmuted into myth as it becomes a springboard for general comments involving human destiny, good and

evil, the tragedy of power. The Godfather films go beyond the story of a Mafia family as they create a drama of greed, vengeance and power; *Heaven's Gate* is not only a conflict between cattlemen and farmers, or even a class confrontation on a vast scale, but, like *The Deerhunter*, a struggle between good and evil.

This view of history—as a battleground for moral issues which is shaped by individuals and psychology, rather than by economic and social forces—is perfectly in tune with the melodramatic/operatic sensibility underlying these films. While they do not share Visconti's view of the world as spectacle or theater, they are imbued with a heightened theatricality, such as that which characterized early melodrama, which operates on several levels. Within the diegesis itself, this theatricality is underscored by the presence of towering villains (Michael Corleone in the Godfather films, the chief of the cattlemen in *Heaven's Gate*, the Vietcong torturers in *The Deerhunter*), the presence of powerful emotions (fear, passion, revenge), violent actions (betrayal, fratricide, suicide, murder) and tremendous contrasts (the cross-cutting between the church ceremonies and the bloody mob murders in *Godfather II*). And the films often contain performances or theatrical sequences which, to varying degrees, reflect upon the film itself. Both the jungle in *Apocalypse Now* and the old West in *Heaven's Gate* constitute the background for such sequences (go-go dancers perform for the troops in Vietnam, the immigrants stage a cockfight), while in the Godfather films sequences of theater are closely interwoven with the narrative. Vito Corleone goes to see an Italian melodrama where he has his first glimpse of the neighborhood boss (dressed melodramatically in white as he would be in Sicily) whom he will have to kill to begin his own career; on his way to perform the deed he passes a puppet show of Sicilian marionettes jousting to the death; Michael Corleone learns his brother has betrayed him during a theatrical/erotic extravaganza in Havana. In addition to theatrical sequences, important moments are often staged as if they were theater. Vito prowls the New York streets like a latter-day Fantômas and, when he murders the old Don, overhead shots of the



APOCALYPSE NOW: *The go-go dancers sequence*

streets make it seem as if we are in an opera house: the murder itself is punctuated by ceremonial music and fireworks from a street festival. The first murder in *Heaven's Gate* is seen through a carefully composed hole in the tent which both frames it and suggests many of the other frames (archways, doorways) used in the film. Even the final "tableaux" of stage melodrama find their counterparts here in the family scenes of the *Godfather* films, the last scene of *The Deerhunter*, or the choral scenes of the immigrants at work in *Heaven's Gate*, all of which are carefully "staged," painterly, designed to imprint themselves upon our memory.

This emphasis upon theatricality is constantly heightened by dramatic lighting, composition, patterns of color and texture. To a certain extent, of course, these have always represented crucial elements in melodrama; in the words of Thomas Elsaesser: "Considered as an expressive code, melodrama might therefore be described as a particular form of dramatic *mise-en-scène*, characterized by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual or literary ones." And, in this code, dramatic values are "sublimated into decor, colour, gesture and composition of frame."⁵ This is more true than ever in these films where the visual motifs are given such weight they often create a subtext of their own which seems to affect us in a subconscious way: the various locations in *The Deerhunter* create a kind of symphony of reds and blues (the red fires of the steel mill, of the bombs in Vietnam, and the bandanas and blood of the Russian roulette players, the blue of the small town) which merge in the final scene with the American flag, just as the browns and sepia tones, or the repeated

shots of water (New York Harbor, the ocean surrounding Cuba, Lake Tahoe) give a special patina to *Godfather II*.

While these motifs may play a more extensive and sophisticated role than they did in earlier films, they are not new. But what is new in these films is the way spectacle, or sequences of spectacle, are intercut with the narrative. In this sense, the films are closer to opera, where the choruses or arias stop and fix the onward narrative flow, than to, say, the films of a Visconti where the narrative is conveyed through spectacle, and where every sequence is part of the spectacle which envelops reality as it does film. In this respect, it is noteworthy that a number of these films are actually structured like opera. *Apocalypse Now* begins with a kind of overture as it shows scenes of the misty jungle, proceeds to Act I—Martin Sheen receiving his orders; Act II—the trip up the river; and Act III—Heart of Darkness, the encounter with Brando-Kurtz.⁶ The overture and finale of *The Deerhunter* are set in the small town and the steel mill while the major acts unfold in Vietnam; in *Heaven's Gate* both the overture and the finale are separated from the rest of the action by distance and by decades.

Of course, the weight and even the function accorded spectacle, or the balance between spectacle and narrative if you will, is not the same in all these films. In this respect, the two films about Vietnam are quite different from each other. In *Apocalypse Now*, the narrative is virtually a pretext for one spectacle scene after another: the helicopter raid (to Wagnerian music), the surfers on the river, the surrealistic camp of the demented Brando-Kurtz. In this nightmarish world, the horror of Vietnam has become a pretext for spectacle: the jungle and burning cities appear as a Dantesque inferno often endowed with a strange beauty of its own. The opening scenes of the misty jungle entrance us visually while the final scene of flaming reds and yellows resembles an abstract painting. Psychology and verisimilitude have been displaced by symbolism and myth: the journey up the river, which makes little sense in terms of modern strategic warfare, is a mythic journey to the deepest realm of the self, to the ultimate horror. While spectacle and symbolism are also present in *The Deerhunter* (one has only



Wedding "overture": THE DEERHUNTER

to think of its jungle scenes, or those of Russian roulette, or those which surround the killing of the deer), unlike *Apocalypse Now*, it is also firmly tied to an American genre (small town friends who go off to war), and to a fairly strong narrative which involves the realistic depiction of place and people. The powerful scenes of war constitute an alien world which contrasts with the scenes at home. And, it may well be that *The Deerhunter* was able to touch a much deeper chord in audiences than *Apocalypse Now* precisely because it was rooted in a reality with which audiences could identify.

Both the *Godfather* films and *Heaven's Gate* are also rooted, significantly, in archtypal American genres (the gangster film and the Western) and they too intercut scenes of spectacle with the narrative as does *The Deerhunter*. Thus, for example, while the wedding scene in *Godfather I* plays a role which has some functions that are narrative (it introduces us to the major characters) or social (it sets up the ethnicity of the Corleone family), what strikes us most about this sequence is its formal qualities (the sunlight wedding contrasting with the dark interiors) which create a kind of subtext reinforcing the film's theme of claustrophobia and power.

Of all the films, it is in *Heaven's Gate* where sequences of spectacle are given their greatest weight—far more weight and length, in all probability, than ever before in American film. There, while the swirling, vertiginous dances at Harvard Yard which occur towards the beginning may create a mood, they serve little narrative purpose; instead, as we'll see, they are there to be echoed formally later in the film. Here, too, the gains of spectacle seem to be made at the expense of narrative conventions which are treated very casually. (This unusual balance may be one of the reasons, in fact, that the film's initial reception was disastrous; in any case, it was largely these sequences of spectacle which were omitted or drastically cut in the shortened version of the film.) Audiences used to conventional narrative cannot help but wonder how a man, last seen at a Harvard graduation, turns up as a sheriff on the frontier twenty years later.⁷ Or why his Harvard sweetheart would wait thirty years to marry him—thirty years in which she does not age at all. In addition to characters who are not really introduced, to an absence of explicit psychology (one can only guess at motives), scenes which would be emphasized in a conventional narrative (for example, the first murder of the immigrants)



HEAVEN'S GATE: *The graduation waltz*

go by so quickly that the audience hardly grasps them on first viewing, and the purpose of other, even lengthy scenes (such as the hero's intervention during a cockfight staged by the immigrants) is never really clear. Still other scenes, including the long valedictory address, only become clear in retrospect. Instead of one climactic battle scene, virtually the last hour of the film is devoted to a series of almost unendurable defeats. Narrative conventions are so totally broken, in fact, and expectations so thwarted, that without prior knowledge of the story it takes a very long while before the subject of the film is clear. And the break with narrative conventions is often matched by spatial dislocations. Not only do the battle scenes generate a sense of confusion (it's not clear where anyone is coming from, or going to) but smoke from guns and explosions often obscures any sense of depth so that the figures appear flattened. Renaissance space and narrative conventions have given way to a mythic world of visual icons.

In the past it has been suggested that American film's traditional emphasis on narrative progression—on acts and consequences—revealed a given ideology or world view; in

the words of Thomas Elsaesser, the transformation of "spatial and temporal sequences . . . into consequences," the "continuum of cause and effect" in classical American film meant that one was "secure in the knowledge that the scenes fitted into each other like cog-wheels in a clock-work, and that all visual information was purposive, inflected towards a plenitude of significance, saturated with clues that explained motivation and character. Out of conflict, contradiction and contingency the narrative generated order, linearity and articulated energy."⁸ Along similar lines, other critics have linked the narrative thrust in earlier American films to an ideology of progress. But if this is true, or even partially true, then the diminished role accorded narrative in these recent films, as well as the fact that the diegesis is constantly cut by spectacle, can be seen as indicators of an ideological shift whereby the "plenitude of significance," the "order, linearity and articulated energy," if they survive at all, have been greatly weakened, and have given way to a loss of belief in action, a sense that the individual can no longer control his own life.

This theoretical link between formal considerations and ideology is certainly buttressed by the mood of these films which is one of

moral nihilism, inevitability and decline. As is often the case is melodrama, the individual seems impotent, caught in a web of destiny which encourages a kind of voluptuous pessimism. A late-Romantic infatuation with the irrational and with death consumes Michael Corleone in the Godfather films as well as Nick in *The Deerhunter*. Like a certain strand of fin-de-siècle literature and art, these films often revel in the grotesque or the pathological. This is especially true of the two films set in Vietnam where war is no longer a testing ground for heroism but a maelstrom of madness and violence. Abnormality reigns in Brando-Kurtz's mad kingdom, reeking of dismembered heads and a savage exoticism, where the final murder is a kind of homoerotic dance, a late romantic marriage of thanatos and eros. The hero of *The Deerhunter* risks his life not to save his friend from the enemy (as in earlier war films) but from a drug-induced obsession with death which compels him to the Russian roulette table in what is probably the strongest scene of the film. Even in those films less prone to emphasize the grotesque, the climate is still one of decline and despair where the individual is prey to murderous forces.

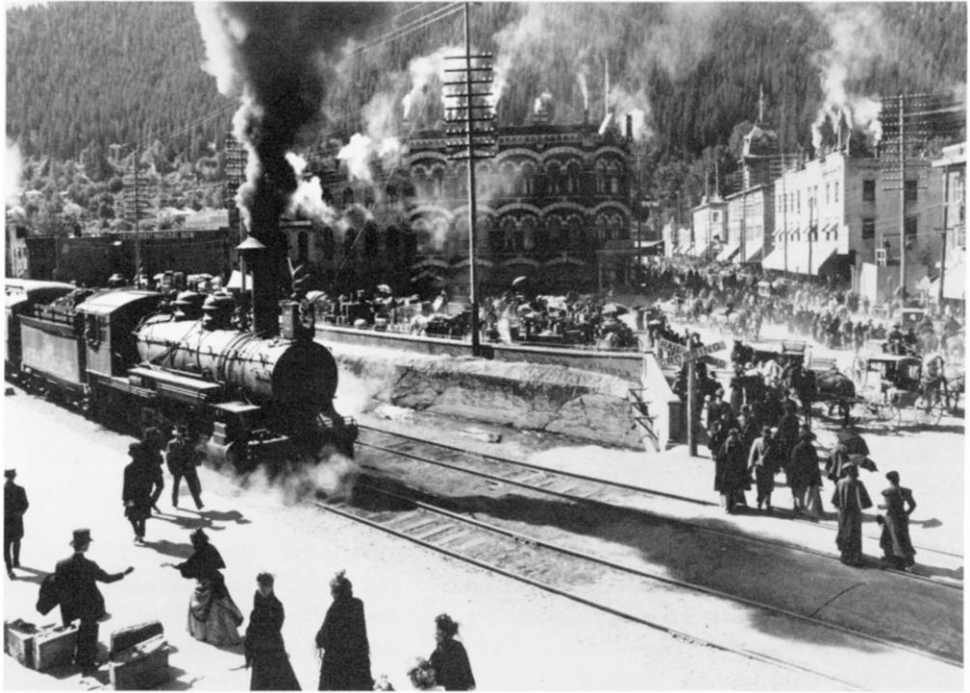
Ultimately, this climate reflects that which haunted a post-Vietnam America which no longer believed in its future or even, for that matter, in what could be seen as the accepted view of its past. It is not coincidental that the rereading of America's past which emerges from some of these films is bleak indeed. The rise of the Mafia family in the Godfather films, for example, has been seen as a parable about the ruthless course of capitalist America.⁹ This may well be so but, in addition, Michael's somewhat inexplicable evolution from gallant World War II veteran (when we first meet him he is in uniform) to cold-blooded killer (by the end of the film he tells us that "if History has taught us anything, it's that you can kill anyone") can also be seen as a metaphor for the America that went from its heroic role in the Second World War to the horror of Vietnam. What is seen as self-preservation at the beginning ends in murderous paranoia as Michael slaughters even those who can no longer do him harm. The specter of Vietnam informs the film's sense that enemies can be anywhere and that no one

can be trusted, while the lone figure of Michael shrouded in darkness at the end suggests the very lonely, powerful yet impotent America which emerged from the war.

In *Heaven's Gate*, the references to the war in Southeast Asia are more explicit and inescapable, the revisionist view of America's past bleaker, the indictment of United States policy perhaps the strongest ever seen in mainstream film. Its very theme raises the question of class exploitation since it concerns the massacre of homesteading immigrants, who embody a peaceful force in most Westerns, at the hands of rich cattle barons and their mercenary killers who are aided not only by the US Army (the American flag which once signalled that aid was on the way now suggests that murder is about to begin), but by the President himself. Their villainous leader, dressed melodramatically in Russian fur hat and long black coat, tells us that his family includes a governor, a former Secretary of State and a Secretary of War. This official war-machine will crush any individual who gets in its way. Devoid of the solidarity and hope for the future offered by the Marxist perspective in *1900*, lacking perforce that film's catharsis, the film's pessimism becomes almost unbearable. Its beaten and lonely hero (the ties of friendship—so crucial to *The Deerhunter*—have been undermined here by political differences and sexual rivalry) is thrice destroyed as in a kind of epic poem: the homesteading immigrants he is helping are massacred, the woman he loves is murdered, and even the personal integrity granted the Western hero is denied him for, at the end, he is a drained shell of a man, drifting aimlessly on his yacht off Newport Beach. The film's rhythm is one of inevitable decline, a decline broken only by sequences which, in one way or another, have to break the diegesis.

But if the sequences of spectacle break the diegetic flow, they also—and this is true of all the films—reinforce major themes. What makes the "message" of *Heaven's Gate* more powerful than, say, that of other "anti-Westerns" (*A Man Called Horse*, *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here*, *Soldier Blue*, *Little Big Man*), which give an imperialist cast to their reading of America's past in the light of Vietnam, is due not only to its epic proportions (length, beauty, sweep) and allusions to class warfare,

HEAVEN'S
GATE:
The
immigrants
arrive
in
Casper.



but to the way it manipulates spectacle. Its musical and visual motifs create and reinforce a sense of tremendous loss, a mood of total despair and hopelessness. Mention has been made of the circle motif, accompanied by the same musical strains, which occurs at important points throughout the film. In the words of a French critic, Michael Henry:

The circle motif structures the *mise-en-scène* of groups. A privileged form of ritual, it [the circle motif] dominates each of these episodes: at Harvard where the Blue Danube Waltz first involves three rings of dancers waltzing in opposite directions (rings enlivened by the dips and swings made by each couple) and then two new, exclusively masculine rings which form around the May Tree; at Sweetwater [on the frontier] where the motif recurs in the rare moments of euphoria (Ella's crazy horse and carriage adventure, the cock fight in the smoky backroom, the roller-skaters' ball . . .); lastly, in the final battle where the murderers are encircled by the immigrants' wagons which are, in turn, encircled by the Cavalry."¹⁰

Like the repetition of music, each successive visual echo imprints itself more strongly upon our sensibility than the preceding ones since it resonates with what we have already seen. Each time the circle motif recurs, it evokes the terrible contrast between the idealism and spontaneity of the opening and the subsequent disillusion and despair. The repetition of key family gatherings and celebrations in the Godfather films punctuate and accent the sense of decline in a similar manner. The first scene showing the family united and at peace remains

in our mind and is the standard by which we judge, and lament, each successive reunion which reveals the growing decay in family bonds.

The implicit comparison between past and present evoked by resonant motifs or recurring sequences (or, in the case of *Godfather II*, by explicit cross-cutting between scenes which depict the rise of the first, immigrant, Godfather and that of his son, Michael) gives rise in these films (with the exception of *Apocalypse Now*) to a mood of overwhelming nostalgia for an America that has been lost, for the American dream gone astray or betrayed. The explicit lament for the "Good Gone Days" in *Heaven's Gate* haunts all these films. The depiction of immigrant groups in the Godfather films and in the two films by Cimino may reflect the directors' background, but it also plays on the mythology of an America seen as the savior of the needy and the poor. Not only has that America disappeared, but in the wake of the seventies we are led to ask whether it ever existed. The beautiful Western landscape of *Heaven's Gate* has lost none of the mythical power it had in former Westerns, but it has become the breeding ground not of justice but of massacre and class warfare. The contrast between the present and the "golden age" from which we are



Kris
Kristofferson
skates
with
Isabelle
Huppert:
HEAVEN'S
GATE

forever exiled—a world of hope epitomized in the lyrical opening of *Heaven's Gate* celebrating America's rebirth after the trauma of the Civil War—is conveyed by powerful color and visual motifs. As Michael Henry has observed, in *Heaven's Gate* a “network of correspondences, antitheses, and internal rimes” links the opening, idealistic scene at Harvard with the scenes on the frontier: i.e., scene of the ranked graduates is echoed by the procession of miserable immigrants, the student choruses by the foreign chants of the workers, the candlelit faces of the beautiful young girls by those of the prostitutes.¹¹ In the *Godfather* films, the golden-hued New York scenes depicting the life of the old Don (with its moments of hope, generosity, warmth) shine luminously in comparison with the America of his son Michael whose total loss of values and human feeling is mirrored in his bleak Nevada estate; the teeming New York streets have given way to an isolated, policed compound.

One of the central visual motifs of both *Godfather II* and *Heaven's Gate* enhances the sense of loss created by these contrasts between past and present, or between landscape and events. Both films play on the theme of photography which is imbued, per se, with a deep nostalgia, with an aching sense of the past: in the words of Susan Sontag, “Photographs promote nostalgia. Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art . . . All photographs are *momenti mori*.”¹² The New York scenes in *Godfather II* recall photographs by

reason of their golden hues and soft focus as well as by their accompanying subtitles such as “Ellis Island, 1901.” The sepia tones of early photographs also characterize certain scenes in *Heaven's Gate* where, in addition, photography is actually brought into the narrative. Somewhat inexplicably, the hero keeps by his bedside a photograph of himself and his youthful love (a photograph which constantly suggests the idealism and romance of the beginning) while the hard-working immigrants find time to pose for a photographer. In this film, the golden/sepia tones bathe not only the rare moments of release and happiness epitomized by the square dance but also the dreadful scenes of massacre, almost as if these should have been, and now are, photographed for posterity. Is this deliberate or unconscious? Is the film commenting upon its own role as a maker or, in this case, as a debunker of photographs/myths?

But in the very strength with which spectacle creates nostalgia there lies a certain danger. For unlike Verdi's operas which raised people to political passion, the mood of these films gently persuades us that all idealism is empty, all action futile, history and historical awareness unimportant. And the resulting emptiness is all too easily filled by a voluptuous nostalgia, and by the problematical myths and ideological confusion that may have contributed to the perceived decline. This is very clear, for example, in the two war films which, almost certainly inadvertently, are tainted with the ugly racism that characterized the

war itself. Brando-Kurtz performs as a white god to teeming Asian masses, while the sadistic Vietcong torturers in *The Deerhunter* would not have felt out of place in a Hollywood film about World War II. *Heaven's Gate* creates a great ambivalence in the audience when it gradually reveals that the slaughtered immigrants, innocent victims who should elicit all our sympathy, are for the most part, weak, cowardly and crude, totally in contrast with the altruistic hero who is (incidentally?) a wealthy man. Cimino has remarked that this portrayal of the immigrants was designed to show them as a "new class which is ready to collaborate, to imitate the stockgrowers. The circle closes once again."¹³ But I'm not sure that this message, pessimistic as it is, comes through. I think, rather, that we begin—however uneasily—to share the class-inspired scorn the cattle barons feel for those newly arrived masses, and to ask ourselves if democracy and justice for such people is worth defending. The collapse of the American ideal is twofold: historical, since an almost official slaughter occurs, and philosophical, since all idealism is made to seem empty.

Of course, it's also possible that the political ambivalences in these films, in addition to their mood of nostalgia, held a deep appeal for a nation that had been deeply traumatized and defeated for the first time. With *The Deerhunter* we could both condemn war (perhaps even Vietnam) and be touched by an old-fashioned patriotism which had become suspect, while the *Godfather* films allowed us to criticize contemporary America and yet wax elegiac about a lost world of family values. And *Heaven's Gate* encouraged a postwar cynicism since its overwhelming pessimism suggests that any struggle against the system is futile. This ambivalence also meant that while the overt message of the *Godfather* films or *Heaven's Gate* might be leftist, the myths upon which they draw (Power and Patriarchy in the one case, Romantic Heroism in the other) could have a reactionary tone. Built into the powerful formal fabric of the film, it is this tone which emerges victorious. The result is that spectacle encourages us to lament the past, to forget history, and to luxuriate in spectacle for its own sake.

NOTES

1. Frank Rahill, *World of Melodrama* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), p. 15.
2. Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," *Monogram*, No. 4 (1972), p. 4.
3. Mark Le Fanu, "Pageants of Violence: Problems on the Staging of History," *Monogram*, No. 6 (October, 1975), pp. 6-7.
4. Le Fanu, p. 11.
5. Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," p. 6.
6. See Ruth McCormick's review of the film in *Cineaste*, Fall, 1979.
7. In an interview with Kris Kristofferson, the critic Charles Champlin was moved to ask if the actor had any ideas about what his character did in the intervening years!
8. Elsaesser, "The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 1970's," *Monogram*, No. 6 (1975), p. 13.
9. John Hess, "*Godfather II*: A Deal Coppola Couldn't Refuse," in *Movies and Methods*, ed. by Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 81-90.
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